By way of approaching our topic this morning, I want you to use your imagination, and to see three scenarios. The first takes place in the year 50 AD, somewhere in Asia Minor.

TO YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN
Matthew 3:1-17 13-17
May 11, 1975

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Text: For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are afar off, every one whom the Lord Our God calls to him." Acts 2:39

~~It ordinarily happened at night~~ It is night, because it would have been very costly to have been detected. A small group has gathered at an underground cistern. There ~~was~~ is a leader, an older man, some other men and women, and a family with children. The leader ~~spoke some words~~ speaks to them about the meaning of what they ~~were~~ are doing, reads something and prays. Then the family strips off their clothes, and one by one ~~were~~ is immersed in the icy water. When they emerge the leader reminds them that they have died to their old lives and ~~were~~ are now resurrected in the new life of Jesus Christ. Candles ~~were~~ are lighted for each one. There ~~were~~ are more prayers and then they ~~went~~ go home. They ~~had~~ have been baptized: they ~~were~~ are now members of the Christian Community, the Church. The early Church gave each person the candle which had been lighted on the occasion. It was lighted again on each anniversary of the baptism to remind the person of the vows made and the promises heard.

The second scenario takes place in 1521, in the forbidding castle of Wartburg. A man is hiding there: an excommunicated priest, he is an outlaw. He spends his time studying, writing and worrying about whether he had done the right thing. This morning he writes in his ledger, in Latin - "Baptizatus sum" - I was baptized.

Martin Luther, when assailed by self-doubt and despair in the midst of the Protestant Reformation, used to ~~say to himself~~ be comforted & encouraged by the fact that he had been baptized. ~~In his ledger 'Baptizatus sum' - I was baptized.~~

For the third scenario only you know the date and place and the people who were present. ~~You and I share that experience.~~ One time ~~we~~ you were carried to the front of a Church or we walked under our own volition. Water was placed on our head or we were immersed: and someone said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Jesus, too was baptized. We don't know how some of the early material was preserved and found its way into the New Testament. None of the Gospel writers were around and so we must assume that later he told his disciples

about ~~this~~ the event that became the pivotal point in his life. The earliest Gospels, Mark and Matthew, both indicate that it was an intimate, personal experience for him. He heard a voice and saw the heavens open and a dove descend. And later, when he looked back on it he realized that it was then that he knew that his life would be a living-out of God's purpose.

Something like baptism was practiced commonly by a lot of ancient religions. The symbolism of descending into water and emerging into new life washed and cleansed of the old has always lent itself to initiatory religious ceremony. From the Mishnah we learn that Gentile converts to Judaism around 100 BC were baptized by immersion in a pool of water. The archeological exploration at the Qum Ran community near the Dead Sea revealed that ritualistic bathing and cleansing were an important part of the common life.

OUT → John the Baptist, perhaps himself a member of one such highly ascetic desert community called his fellow countrymen to repent of their wicked ways and to begin a new life by being baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. Jesus of Nazareth was one of the people who did so. Nothing in the record indicates that he was motivated by a sense of guilt nor that he needed to repent. Rather Jesus was itentifying with his people, his nation and making common cause with this campaign to put the nation back on the side of justice and mercy and righteousness. But the effect of the experience for him was an ordination, a commissioning. He emerged from the waters and set out on his life ministry.

The early Church, at the bidding of Jesus, appropriated this ancient ritual for its own purposes, as it did also with the Passover meal. The

earliest Christian message was "repent and be baptized," verbalized by Peter on the day of Pentecost. ("The promise is to you and your children") Peter told a startled crowd in Jerusalem several weeks after the crucifixion and no less than three thousand people responded and were baptized. Since that day, baptism has been the mark and seal of a Christian and the rite of admission to the Church.

Across the centuries the Church has debated the mode and method of Sacrament of Baptism. On the one hand some have insisted on total immersion - others on the sprinkling of water. Scholars with superb credentials line up on both sides, but neither is able to prove the absolute correctness of one position to anyone's satisfaction but its own. The evidence is more negative than positive. The Pentecost experience, for instance, at which three thousand were baptized took place without, we must assume, a tank of that velocity. The other dispute is in regard to the appropriate time for baptism. Some have held that the Sacrament should be received only by those who have, in maturity, decided to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Baptism comes after faith. Others, the Churches of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition among them, baptize infants. And again, the New Testament is not very precise, although St. Paul does make reference to baptizing entire families. Our Church has said that either form is appropriate but the weight of our heritage and our theology is on the side of infant baptism: a process that begins in infancy and comes to completion in confirmation and commissioning in later years. ~~In a sense, what was begun in baptism, is not complete until the individual affirms for himself or herself the vows and promises made on the day of baptism.~~

I should like to discuss the Sacrament of Baptism this morning in terms of three promises. It seemed a good day to do it, in that it is the occasion for celebrating motherhood - ~~on parenthood, at least in light~~ as in the light of Fem. Lib, at least parenthood ~~of Pentecost~~. And besides, ~~we have celebrated the Sacrament~~ the Sacrament was part of our worship experience this morning. We have all had a part in it.

First, the promise of God which we hear and affirm every time we baptize, the promise that Peter said was "to you and your children" ; namely, that God loves and forgives and accepts you; that in Jesus Christ he has given you a new life; that God's grace is available to you even though you have done nothing to deserve it. That is what we are affirming when we baptize infants.

Unfortunately, popular piety seems to believe that babies are baptized as a kind of insurance; that we baptize babies to "save" them, and that should they die in infancy before baptism they will not go to heaven. We do not believe that. There are no "shoulds" or "oughts" or "have-to's" in a Presbyterian Baptism. And I find the suggestion that God's love and mercy are withheld from an infant because parents neglected to include the sacrament in the list of other baby innoculations theologically repugnant and rather sad.

I confess unapologetically that I love infant baptism, and not only for ~~I love to be in the congregation when it is happening and I love to participate in it~~ sentimental reasons, although that is undoubtedly part of it. Nowhere, I would submit, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so clearly articulated. An infant knows nothing but immediate physical and emotional need: we have not yet had the opportunity to make moral judgments about ~~him~~ a baby ~~he~~, but if original sin is egotism an infant is certainly ~~an innocent~~ a sinner, albeit an innocent one ~~sinner~~; for when he's wet he wants to be dry now and when she's hungry she wants to be fed now and when he or she is distressed attention is demanded now regardless of what else is going on. An infant doesn't know about

God, hasn't thought about God, in fact hasn't thought about much of anything but food and warmth and love. And what we are saying in Baptism is that God's love extends to this child. God calls this child his own; this child is safe and secure. Regardless of how many times we have heard the Gospel of grace preached from the pulpit we seem, all of us, to harbor the hope that we just might be able to persuade God to love us a little more. But infant baptism says eloquently and uncategorically that God's love comes to us quite apart from any deserving, that he loves us and is willing to count us among his people just as we are. There are no "shoulds" or "oughts" or "have to's" in infant baptism. Rather we come to it as recipients - and in that act I find expressed all that is good and joyful and worth celebrating in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second promise in Baptism is made by the parents: "Do you intend your child to be his disciple: to obey his word and show his love?"

Are we not, in this promise, making a commitment that the child should make for himself? Are we not prejudicing the child? Of course we are, and I would suggest that we ought to do so with the highest degree of intentionality. We are saying in baptism that we will do everything possible to see that our child discovers the goodness and richness of God's grace. We are saying, as we do in a lot of other areas in life, that we are not neutral on this one. The oposite, it seems to me, is naive,

In the diary he kept as a young minister Reinhold Niebuhr commented on the myth of objectivity and neutrality in education.

"This conference on religious education," he wrote, "seems to your humble servant the last word in absurdity. We are told by a delightful expert that we ought not really teach our children about God lest we rob them of the opportunity of making their own discovery of God, and lest we corrupt their young minds with our own superstitutions. If we continue along these lines the day will come when some expert will advise us not to teach our children the English language, since we rob them thereby of the possibility of choosing the German, French or Japanese language. We do not get a higher type of religious idealism from children merely by witholding our own religious ideas from them any more than we would get a higher type of civilization by letting some group of youngsters shift for themselves upon a desert island." ("Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cinic, p 186 - 187)

But more to the point we are touching something here that is profoundly important and profoundly true. Human life does not grow in a vacuum. From the very beginning of a child's life the relationship with parents is a determining and essential one. Infants need love, not abstractly but expressed in touching, holding, fondling as much as they need food and drink. In a study, which has since become very famous Dr. Rene Spitz observed ninety-one infants in a foundling home. The babies had everything they needed - food, air, warmth, toys - everything but the care of a Mother. One nurse had charge of ten infants. And three months with one tenth of a Mother were enough to produce dramatic personality changes in the infants. Thirty-eight died in their first year and twenty-one were severely disturbed emotionally and intellectually. Parental love isn't a luxury. It is a physical and emotional necessity. (See Revel L. Howe, Man's Need and God's Action p 20)

with clear religious overtones..

Eric Erikson, coined the phrase "basic trust" and taught that a person develops the capacity in the first year of life. The world and other people are trust-worthy depending on the trust the infant has learned from his parents. ~~And sense of God depends totally on the ability to~~

We learn to love as we are loved. We learn to esteem ourselves, the prequisite for esteeming anybody else, insofar as we are given that gift by loving parents.

Revel Howe wrote, "My faith is that God uses my power of love, limited and sinful though it is, to prepare my child for the experience of His reconciling and fullfilling love. ~~He can use the limitations of my love that my child may experience more than my love for him~~" (Ibid. p 96)

And in a scholarly work on the ~~Theology of the~~ Sacraments Theology the Scots D.M. Baillie quotes what looks like a young's ~~mundane~~ mawkish poem -
"The baby has no skies
But Mother's eyes.
Nor any God above
But Mother's love.
His angel sees
the Father's Face,
But he the Mother's
full of grace;
And yet the
heavenly kingdom
is
of such as this"
[The Theology of the Sacraments. p 87
That isn't mawkish,
that's sound psychology
+ theology.

All of that is held up, with the highest intent, as parents bring children to the sacrament of baptism. On a more mundane level the promise they made means, minimally - I think, that the child will be in Church: that he will be here through the years in Church school and worship: that he will learn quite early that this building and the people he meets here are an important part of his life. It means minimally that the parents are agreeing to take the religious nurture and growth of the child with a great deal of seriousness.

The third promise is made by the Church. You were involved in baptism this morning. In fact it couldn't have happened without you. Presbyterian Baptism is celebrated in the context of worship with a congregation, not privately. You promised, "to tell these children the good news of the Gospel, to help them know all that Christ commands,

and by your fellowship to strengthen their family ties with the household of God."

That's what holds it all together - your part in it. There are no God-parents: you fill that role: you are participants in baptism - not spectators.

2 pages to go

One of the functions of religion is to celebrate the important moments in life. In our time the role of the Church in those moments is dramatically less that it has been over the centuries. Congregations rarely celebrate marriage: sometimes in fact people call to ask if they can use the building - which reduces your role to one of providing space and facilities. Unlike the past, congregations rarely observe the death of one of their own. But we are still doing it together in baptism. We are standing with parents at the threshold of adventure, celebrating with them the life they have helped to create and for which they are responsible.

OUT? Check time

5 min. more

You have agreed, in essence, in your promise, to be the Church to these children. You have agreed to be a community of caring people through which and in which the love of God will be made known to those children.

~~Our business as the Church [illegible] to be the relationship through which we may experience, at least partially, the love of God that [illegible] (Ibid, p. 95)~~

Love, faith, trust cannot be taught in an objective sense. They are learned as they are experienced in personal relationships. And in baptism we are saying that here, in this Church, we will provide the kind of environment in which love and faith and trust are seen and experienced and therefore learned. We are saying, in baptism, that these children are now very special to us: that we will be loving and forgiving and

accepting to them through all their years in our midst. We are saying that we will remember them and that the relationship sealed today is forever. When I was in college and going through that inevitable period of sophomoric skepticism, an elderly lady from my church wrote to me regularly, showed interest in my progress and sent me a monthly devotional magazine. I didn't read the magazine very much but the fact that I could be of some interest to her was a significant influence in my life. I have come to understand it as an expression of a promise she made one day when I was baptized.

Every baptism is a reminder of our own. It is a reminder that we are who we are - not in solitary isolation - but in relationship with others. It is a reminder that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian, but that we meet Christ in the fellowship, in the relationship we share here in the community of faith. We are continuing to discover the life - giving potential in human relationships.

Elizabeth Kübler Ross has written the definitive contemporary work on Death and Dying. In a seminar once she told a story I will never forget. She had been retained as a consultant at a very sophisticated European hospital. She discovered that terminally ill infants and elderly people were isolated: that the medical staffs in these departments were not only unhappy with their work but that the "tone" on both floors was quite grim and tight-lipped. She made a very simple suggestion: "Put the babies and the grannies together: in the same rooms if possible: let the grannies feed and love the babies when they can: let the babies feed the grannies with their own special kind of love and need." A miracle happened, a miracle that always happens when people are enabled to love each other. The grandmothers

had meaning added to the final days of life: the babies responded. in kind. Human contact - relationship - changed everything and even though they were all terribly ill, life began to make sense, and even to be worth living.

That is the beauty and truth of Baptism. None of us can be alone. None of us is an only child of God. We are called, here in the Church, to the privilege of being the channel through which God's love is experienced by others. There is no more vital, no more life-giving task than that. Nor is there a greater priviledge.

The promise is to you - and to your children. Amen.

Father we are grateful for your love. We are grateful for the children you have given us to love - our own and the children of others. Use our love for your purposes. Help us to grow as a family and to experience in our life together the miracle of your grace: Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.